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ABSTRACT

A pathological image of the African American has infiltrated U.S. education. With desegregation and the arrival of African American children in white America's schools has come the application of psychological and educational labels that create and constrain the educational experiences of the African American child. These labels have not evolved in an ideological vacuum. They reflect the nature of schools as sites of unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital and they hide the profound interrelations of people, marking the black student as deviant and inferior. Schools then succeed with convincing the disinherited that they owe their destiny to their lack of gifts or merits. Labels and categories of deviance such as "at risk" leave educators with the impression that in order for the African American student to succeed, he or she must be exposed to various and repeated treatments. The approach contends that the African American student comes to school with a natural resistance to learning. Schools become agencies of negative credentials, certifying particular groups of young people as socially inferior at an early age. Such labels actually endanger the very students they purport to empower. Until the way that everyday school practices endorse existing control systems is questioned and challenged, African American students will continue to be on the sidelines. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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School Reform: Challenging the Race Orthodoxy

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I am ...invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed everything and anything but me.

-Ralph Ellison

African Americans have "sat with statisticians" and had a "social science committed against them (Greer, 1970). Since the early 1960's African Americans have been the *stuff* of the social sciences, as well as the centerpiece of reform discourse. Health, education and other social agencies have been perennially preoccupied with surveying the black pathology. What has emerged is a portrait of the African American as a member of a moribund ethnic group that is an overproducer of losers (Greer, 1972). Like Ralph Ellison's "invisible man" a grossly distorted African American image is ubiquitous in social indicator data on the incidences of crime, teenage pregnancy, single-parenthood, female-headed households, welfare dependency, and academic underachievement.

This pathological image has infiltrated the school shaping the perception and treatment of African American children. With desegregation and the arrival of African American children at the door of

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white America's schools came the invention and mass application of psychological and educational labels that would serve to both create and constrain the educational experiences of the African American child. Alternately, this student was to be viewed as "culturally deprived, " "culturally disadvantaged," "culturally different," and "social rejected." Now the term is "at risk" but the basic meaning has remained unchanged (Ogbu, 1974). Beneath these labels persist racist notions about the African American child as biologically, culturally, linguistically, psychologically and socially deficient and/or deviant. Most notably, these labels evince that the schools have been historically conditioned to interact with the African American student from a model of pathology rather than from a model of potentiality, and from an attitude of neglect rather than one of nurturing.

The Politics of Labeling

Educator's labels and "commonsense categories" (Apple, 1990) have not evolved in an ideological vacuum nor are they devoid of hegemonic attachments. These labels and categories reflect the nature of schools as sites of unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital, as well as hide (or even disguise) the profound interrelations of persons. Further, the relationship between label and category assignment and institutional assumptions is a synergistic one:

> ... categories develop out of specific social and historical situations which conform to a specific framework of assumptions and institutions, the use of which categories brings with it the logic of the institutional assumptions as well (Apple, 1990, p.134).

Though educational labels and categories are historically rooted, socially constructed meanings systems they nonetheless have a powerful and *real* effect on students reifying them so that "educators can confront students as institutional abstractions rather than as concrete persons with whom they have real ties in the process of cultural and economic reproduction" (Apple, 1990, p. 128). Against the backdrop of the "normative gaze" of mainstream educational discourse African American youth have been constructed as deviant entities in the educational and social arrangement (Weis, 1988) and have been labeled as such. In schools, they are disproportionately represented in the ranks of the negatively labeled - generally, the at risk and more specifically, the learning disabled, the severely behaviorally handicapped and the mentally retarded.

What is the net effect of this labeling? Deviantizing and inferiorization (Schur, 1980) are two outcomes. As modes of subordination each is, in effect, a key element in the larger society's stratification (Schur, 1980). Thus, labeling implies that the identity and status attributed to the person labeled is negatively altered. Further, the ranks of the labeled are viewed as homogeneous:

> Usually the deviant has an *essentializing* quality in that a person's (here, a student's) entire relationship to an institution is conditioned by the category applied to him. He *is* this and only this (Apple, 1990, p.135).

Further, culpability lies with the labeled individual. Here, the pernicious assumption is that there *is* a problem and that this problem lies within the student and who he or she is. The application of labels, such as "at risk", elide the very real possibility of "institutional culpability" (Apple, 1990):

There is a strong inclination to divert attention both from the inadequacies of the educational institution itself and what bureaucratic, cultural, and economic conditions caused the necessity of applying these constructs originally (Apple, 1990, p. 135).

In this way, schools can, with little or no coercion, convince the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits (Oakes, 1985, p.21). With the cause of the deviance residing within the person to whom the label has been attached, the solutions to the problems that he or she presents can be achieved by doing something to him or her. Thus, from the labels and category assignments arise various prescriptions for the treatment of the at risk student. Now the student can be "processed as deviant" (Schur, 1980):

... almost all action is focused on changing the individual rather than the defining agent, the larger institutional context (Apple, 1990, p. 145).

This processing results in "altered interactional structure," "reduction of legitimate opportunities," and a change in the image of the labeled (Knutsson, 1977). For the African American child, who has been and continues to be subjected to newer and more sophisticated categories of deviance, labeling translates into the legitimate "explaining away" of the possibility of achievement, thus making academic success a rarity rather than a norm for this student. Labels and categories of deviance such as "at risk" leave educators with the impression that in order for the African American student to succeed he or she must be exposed to varied and repeated *treatments*. This assertion contends that the African American student comes to the school with a natural resistance to learning (Ogbu, 1974) and that it takes *inordinate* effort and massive organizational

restructuring to have this student achieve. Finally, once classified the student is rarely reclassified:

> ...the effect of these labels is immense for they call forth forms of treatment which tend to confirm the person in the institutionally applied category (Apple, 1990, p.138).

Educational at riskness usually translates into economic at riskness:

> The labels imputed by the public schools are borrowed by legal, economic, health and community institutions to define the individual in his or her contact with them as well (Apple, 1990, p.138).

In this regard, notions of the schools as agencies of "negative credentialism (Greer, 1972) - certifying particular groups of youngsters as socially inferior at an early age, and initiating the process that keeps them economically inferior well into adulthood (Greer, 1972) - ring true, especially for the African American student.

The Politics of Amelioration: Who's Helping Whom?

In schools, the characteristics and distribution of those who are considered educationally deviant - generally, those labeled "at risk" - fall along "racial"/ethnic lines. As such, only certain groups get labeled. Those who do, come primarily from exposed social environments (Knutsson, 1977, p.70). This fits the view that control organizations - of which the school is one - "pursue a systematic selection which causes those weak in

social power to be officially labeled more extensively than those who are strong in power" (Knutsson, 1977, p. 70). Those who are weaker in power tend to be African American children - the labeled. Those who are stronger in power tend to be white (Anglo/European) male adults who overwhelmingly comprise the ranks of educational researcher (theorists) and whose conceptual creations (theories) dominate educational practice and largely guide social reform rhetoric and activity. These are the labelers. Noting the power and status difference between the two groups problematicizes the seemingly neutral and seemingly helpful act of labeling. Labels such as *at risk* elide the "conditions which have led to one group of people consistently labeling others as deviant or applying some other taken for granted abstract category to them" (Apple, 1990, p.136). Indeed, such arrangement highlight the racist nature of labeling - "those with superior brains or superior culture know what is best, and therefore have a right to exploit and assume authority over people they view as lower on the hierarchy" (Weis, 1988, p. 146). Invariably, that which is deemed "best" conforms to and supports unequal power relations, generally preserving the interests of the dominants.

In the end, these labels serve to actually endanger the very students they purport to empower. Indeed, linguistic tools such as the educators labels and commonsense categories serve to "abuse and degrade those individuals and classes of people to whom the designations are so quickly given" (Apple, 1990, p.136).

What Does All Of This Mean For School Reform?

Racism is not only found in ideal constructs but in the regular practices, rules, and the enduring features of society. In schools, even if we concede that overtly racist attitudes are absent, the structural correlates - inequality, disadvantage and subordination - persist and are still fashioned along "racial" lines (Tronya and Williams, 1986) Educator's commonsense categories and labels reflect racist ideological attachments and act as a veneer clouding the fact that "these forms of language and the perspectives they embody are not just liberal helping devices, but are mechanisms by which schools engage in anonymizing and sorting out individuals into preordained social, economic, and educational slots" (Apple, 1990, p.126).

Until school reform research and activity interrogate and challenge how everyday school practices endorse "existing technical, cultural and economic control systems that accept the distribution of power in American society as a given" (Apple, 1990, p. 129) African American students will continue to be sidelined, participating in the schooling game only tangentially and experiencing rare, momentary and fleeting successes.

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